

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA
IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS

The Annals of Iowa

Volume 53 | Number 4 (Fall 1994)

pps. 386-387

The Persistence of Ethnicity: Dutch Calvinist Pioneers in Amsterdam, Montana

ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

"The Persistence of Ethnicity: Dutch Calvinist Pioneers in Amsterdam, Montana." *The Annals of Iowa* 53 (1994), 386-387.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.9857>

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The Persistence of Ethnicity: Dutch Calvinist Pioneers in Amsterdam, Montana, by Rob Kroes. Statue of Liberty–Ellis Island Centennial Series. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992. 162 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, appendix, bibliographical essay, indexes. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY BRIAN W. BELTMAN, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

As the director of the America Institute and professor of American studies at the University of Amsterdam, Rob Kroes brings a unique Netherlandic perspective to the study of an immigrant group in the American West that makes his book an insightful addition to rural ethnic history. The author characterizes his consideration of the Dutch Calvinist settlers in the West Gallatin River valley, centered on the hamlets of Churchill and Amsterdam, Montana, as a "narrative evocation" that tells a story of "communal endeavor and internal strife" (151). This examination of a minuscule ethnic enclave whose history began in the 1890s and continues to the present focuses most sharply on the first generation of residents and a religious controversy occurring in the 1920s and 1930s. Based in part on personal interviews in the area as well as on letters, diaries, family memoirs, school board minutes, and church records, Kroes's community study sheds light on "ethnicity as a process of continual change." It combines the perspectives of the historian and the cultural anthropologist to explore the "cultural psychology of ethnicity" (5). Kroes concentrates on the collective behavior of an identifiable group of people conveying ethnic consciousness—in this case Dutchness—and pays special attention to the essential ingredient of religion—in this instance the Christian Reformed denomination.

Kroes's investigation fits into the "new immigrant history" in several ways. He takes a longitudinal approach by examining both the causes of emigration of farm folk from the sea-clay regions of the Netherlands in the late nineteenth century as well as their subsequent resettlement near Manhattan, Montana, where they practiced irrigated farming to raise barley. He recognizes the influence of migration chains so instrumental to transplantation. And he details the establishment of local churches as the basis of communal life and the core of ethnic identity. Significantly, he finds patterns of "ongoing dispersal and continued local attachment" (40).

Kroes's analysis of community growth of the ethnic enclave also reveals impulses toward consensus and conflict. Residential clustering developed to the extent permitted by access to available and affordable land. Church formation was an act of community consolidation reflecting a unified sense of religious commitment. Starting a denomi-

national elementary school, distinct from existing public rural schools, was another reaffirmation of Dutch ethnocultural tradition. All these were manifestations of social cohesion among immigrants in a strange land trying to find ways to connect and rebuild a sense of community.

Despite these vivid elements of ethnic persistence, some immigrants broke ranks to acculturate to American ways via participation in mainline churches and schools, involvement in local activities of non-Dutch residents, and economic transactions with the larger world outside the immigrant community. Divergence also occurred within the enclave as a result of a search for doctrinal purity in religious matters. Efforts to prevent a decline of standards that might jeopardize social cohesion and tribal unity led to internal schism and factionalism. Yet ironically, as Kroes cogently argues, this internecine struggle among Dutch Americans intensified their ethnic consciousness. Only the Dutch could understand the subtle points of divisiveness and its ultimate significance for their lives. The debates helped define the boundaries between the local immigrants and the realm of the non-Dutch. They were another gesture to preserve ethnic identity in the face of assimilationist pressures from the American mainstream. "Conflict and integration" (120) within an ethnic community of varied socioeconomic strata went hand in hand to bind together those who shared common national origins, religious traditions, family ties, settlement history, and other similarities against a secular world vastly different and threatening to overwhelm the enclave.

Kroes's basic inquiry might be applied to rural ethnic communities still traceable in Iowa. Concentrations of immigrant progeny are evident today in various localities. Danes appear in Audubon and Shelby Counties; Swedes in Montgomery, Henry, and Webster Counties; Belgians in Poweshiek County; Welsh in Davis County; Irish in Palo Alto and Wapello Counties; Czechs in Howard and Winneshiek Counties; Norwegians in Hamilton, Humboldt, Emmet, Cerro Gordo, Allamakee, and Winneshiek Counties; and Dutch in Sioux and Marion Counties. Within these counties might be found townships, villages, or rural neighborhoods that variously demonstrate ethnic persistence and that could yield histories as rich in community development and social dynamics as Kroes discovered in Montana. Kroes sets a high standard to emulate. His writing style is engaging, with its use of apt descriptions, striking similes, and instructive explanations of conceptual abstractions. He also expertly uses appropriate vignettes from family histories that illustrate larger processes at work and shows astute sensitivity to subtleties of language and phrasing in primary sources. This case study of ethnic persistence merits attention.

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